

Edward the Third an economic change that had no doubt been long in process, was brought to notice by political and military events. Much of the wool that had been previously exported in a raw state to feed the looms of Bruges and Ghent, was now worked into cloth on this side of the Channel, and carried across in vessels owned by enterprising merchants of London and Bristol and manned by English-speaking crews. To support this new and promising development of national undertaking, Edward the Third and his Parliaments entered on a deliberate course of economic legislation, backed by military and diplomatic activity. The French wars and Flemish alliances were conceived by the government and approved by the nation largely for industrial and commercial ends. In 1340 this policy triumphed at Sluys, when the English merchant navy sank a rival flotilla from the French ports. It triumphed again at Crecy and Poitiers (1346-1356), for these battles enabled Edward to realise his dream of erecting a great empire, held together by trade across the Channel and the Bay of Biscay.¹ It is idle to speak of Alfred as the founder of the British navy. He lost the whole east coastline of England to the Danes, and it was only these Danes, against whom he was constantly fighting, who introduced a little maritime enterprise among his lethargic Saxon subjects. For hundreds of years after Alfred the English were essentially landmen. It was not till the reign of Edward the Third that we seriously took to the sea, and made a national effort to establish our commercial and naval position in the teeth of rivals. Thenceforward, although times of depression and defeat alternated with periods of success, we never ceased to be a sea-going people, to have a parliamentary commercial policy, and to be known and feared on the Continent as trade rivals in all the Northern seas.

But although Edward the Third had a naval policy, he had not a royal navy. For our generation, which sometimes spends on its warships in a year of peace two hundred times as many pounds as then covered all royal expenditure in a year of war, it may be hard to realise that there was then practically no such thing as a navy distinct from a mercantile marine.

* Cunningham, 245-50.